

The Day of the Athletes

More than 670 athletes shine at Special Olympics

by Christine June

KAISERSLAUTERN--It was their day, but the German and American athletes happily shared their triumphs May 3 at the 23rd Annual Special Olympics Spring Games 2006.

Sponsored here by the U.S. Army Garrison Kaiserslautern, Special Olympics is an international athletic competition for children and adults with special needs. This is the seventh year it was held and co-hosted by the German Police Academy in Enkenbach Alsenborn.

“Today, the athletes are the center of attention,” said Tryn Rekker, who organized this year’s games. “They can choose their events or activities and participate when and how many times they want.” Like, Emre Ozguc from Patrick Henry Elementary School in Heidelberg, who wanted to keep on running so volunteers manning the 50-meter races held extra heats for him and other like-minded athletes. He ran more than five times after he won his first race. “I like to run,” said the fourth-grader.

“He could race all day,” said Air Force Staff Sgt. Rayna Lawter from Landstuhl Regional Medical Center, who was volunteering as Ozguc’s buddy – an athlete’s personal coach, cheerleader and friend for the day.

“It’s a special day just for them, and it’s great seeing all the kids have a great time,” said Lawter, who was volunteering in her second Special Olympics, her first here. “Sportsmanship is great among the athletes, and they’re very appreciative, saying ‘thank you’ to those volunteering for their day.”

Ozguc was one of 674 athletes competing in eight competitive games such as soccer, badminton and volleyball, and enjoying 12 non-competitive games like treasure hunt or parachute. The athletes, ages 5 to 70, were from 46 schools and institutions throughout Germany and Belgium.

“The kids are having such a blast,” said Sandy Gayler, Ozguc’s teacher, who escorted 16 children to the games. “All the volunteers are very dedicated, and you can tell they’re enjoying themselves as well as having fun working with the kids.”

Volunteering to help with the athletes’ day were 1,416 German and American military and civilian members from surrounding areas.

Ribbons were given at each competitive event for just trying, with some athletes garnering first, second or third place honors. By the end of the games, numerous multicolored ribbons adorned most athletes. Adding to the color were more than 200 medals of gold, silver and bronze awarded in the competitive games in gender-specific categories such as assisted, unassisted or wheelchair bound.

The Sarah Bican Inspirational Athlete Trophy was awarded to Daniel Dahm from Jakob- Muth-Schule in Kusel, for showing a spirit and love of the games. This award is named after Sarah Bican, who as a Department of Defense Dependents Schools-Europe teacher brought Special Olympics to Kaiserslautern in 1974.

Kaiserslautern American High School Junior Paul Phipps received the Army Garrison Commander's Award as this year's best overall athlete.

"I love it," said Phipps about his trophy, giving it another kiss like he did at the medal ceremony. "I practice all the time (as a member of his school's track-and-field team)." Phipps' special education teacher, Mark Pierce, said his students look forward to the garrison's Special Olympics every year.

"It's amazing how they can bring so many different schools together and have this kind of organization with this many events for children who have special needs," he said. "It's just amazing that they do this."

Schools in Heidelberg, Mannheim and Kaiserslautern military communities were represented at this year's games.